



**James Fishkin**

## Putting all of Europe in one room

What would happen if a representative sample of European citizens were put in one room for a weekend and informed on an issue important to all of them? James Fishkin's Deliberative Polling would do just this, seeing what the difference in opinion would be between an informed and uninformed public. Europeans from all 25 member states would be brought together to discuss issues that they would usually only talk about with citizens of their own countries.

For some years now, I have thought that Deliberative Polling<sup>1</sup> might have an especially important application if adapted to a Europe-wide event. What is a Deliberative Poll? Ordinary polls offer a snapshot of the public's impressions of sound bites and headlines. A Deliberative Poll, by contrast, attempts to represent what the public *would* think if it really became engaged in the issues under good conditions, and in particular, if it really became more informed. With various collaborators, I have conducted Deliberative Polls in countries around the world, ranging from the US to Britain, Australia, Denmark, Bulgaria, Canada, and most recently, China. For more on Deliberative Polling see the web site for our Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University <http://cdd.stanford.edu>.

The basic idea of a Europe-wide Deliberative Poll is straightforward. Random and representative samples of citizens in all 25 member states would be recruited so as to aim for a total sample about the size of the European Parliament. Such a sample would give an excellent picture of European public opinion as a whole. In addition, for some of the larger states it would give a picture of informed opinion in those particular states. After the sample in each country was given a survey, they would be recruited to come for a weekend of deliberations in a single place, perhaps the European Parliament Building in Brussels. Survey researchers would have to stay in touch with the initial sample, offer them financial incentives to participate, pay for their transportation, meals, and hotels. In Deliberative Polls around the world, we have managed to get very representative samples to participate. We know this because we can compare the people who come with those who do not come, both in terms of their attitudes and their demographics. When members of the sample agree, they are sent carefully balanced briefing materials, put together by an advisory committee of prominent experts and advocates on all credible sides of the issue. This briefing document is an initial basis for discussion. It is also useful for other efforts at outreach and public education.

Once gathered at a single site, the sample is assigned to diverse small groups of say a dozen or fifteen. The discussions in these groups employ trained moderators who facilitate the discussion, who make sure that no one dominates and everyone has a chance to speak. The groups talk through the issue, initially on the basis of the briefing document, identifying key questions they wish to ask panels of competing experts in plenary sessions. The groups then all come

together in plenary sessions in which those questions are posed, and answered by competing experts and policymakers. The entire weekend alternates the small group discussions and the plenary sessions. At the end of the weekend the participants take the same questionnaire as on first contact. Ideally a control group (a separate random sample who do not deliberate) will be asked the same questions in a conventional survey. In that way we can demonstrate that the changes are due to the deliberative process and not just the public debate.

Every aspect of the process is designed to facilitate people behaving a bit more like ideal citizens — the briefing materials, the dialogues with competing experts, the small group discussions with people from different points of view, the moderators who make sure that everyone has a chance to participate and that there is an atmosphere of mutual respect. What is distinctive, fundamentally, about the Europe-wide version is that the participants are not just behaving a bit more like ideal citizens of their own countries. They are experiencing what it would be like for them to behave like ideal *citizens of Europe* — historically something that is entirely unprecedented for a Europe-wide mass public. The project would, in effect, call into being a Europe-wide public sphere in which the voice of the public could be facilitated.

The project, like all Deliberative Polls, is many things at once. It is a social science experiment, a contribution to the public dialogue, and a form of public consultation. The fact that rigorous social science is employed should give the results credibility. Such a project would engage not just some haphazard collection of people convened by television networks. Rather it would be a scientifically credible representation of what the people of Europe would think if they could talk to each other and to competing experts and become more informed. Like other Deliberative Polls, the process would also be a televised event and could be expected to receive wide coverage in all the member countries. After all, it would be unique just to see and hear what Europe is like all in one place, via the representation of a scientific microcosm. When we did the first British Deliberative Poll in 1994, my British collaborator, Roger Jowell, said that he had selected thousands of national random samples, but he had never SEEN one. No one had. Ordinary polls do not gather people together to talk to each other because they might influence each other, they might learn from each other. But here that is part of the point of the exercise.

Many of the key arguments I have applied in support of Deliberative Polling in other contexts apply especially here. First, the public is not well-informed about complex matters of policy and politics. This is certainly obvious with the mass public in most countries with respect to the European constitution. Social scientists have a term for this — rational ignorance. If I have one vote in millions, why should I spend all the time and effort to become well-informed. My individual vote or opinion will not likely make much difference. But the design of the Deliberative Poll changes the incentives for the microcosm. The participants feel that their voice matters and have every reason to pay a lot of attention and come to an informed judgment. Second, even if people talk about politics or policy in ordinary life, they tend to talk to people like themselves. This is clearly true of Europe, where whatever public dialogue there is takes place country by country. So someone in France will rarely talk to someone in another country, say Italy or Portugal, about European issues in a serious way. The elites may have this discussion, but it will be rare or at least only episodic at the mass level. However, in the Europe-wide Deliberative Poll the participants will come from the entire EU and the groups will have the

maximum diversity compatible with the practicalities of translation within the groups. Third, if people do discuss the issue, because some element of it becomes highly charged, they will tend to talk to people on the same side. A conversation with someone who fundamentally disagrees with you can be unpleasant, and most people would rather avoid it. However, the moderators in the Deliberative Poll are trained to encourage civility, and the diversity of the sample will inevitably expose participants to viewpoints they have not encountered before in face to face discussion. Fourth, news sources can be similarly personalized and the web may in fact make this problem worse. However, in the Deliberative Poll, the briefing materials and expert panels will be transparently balanced, giving people access to arguments on competing sides in a context where they will pay attention to those arguments.

While there are practical issues of cost and language (one might imagine the use of EU translators in the Parliament, with the groups distributed so as to limit the heterogeneity of language in each group just enough to make the project practical) such an experiment would, in effect, put all of Europe in one great room — but under conditions where this microcosm of the people can think through the hard issues the EU faces. There are hundreds of polls that show what the public in one country or another is thinking about Europe. So isn't there room for at least one effort that would show what the people of Europe as a whole would think — if they were well informed and really engaged in the issues?

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<sup>1</sup> Deliberative Polling® is a registered trademark of James S. Fishkin. Any funds from the trademark are used entirely to support research.

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